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THE COMING VICTORY



A SPEECH MADE BY
GENERAL SMUTS

On October 4, 1917

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LONDON NEW YORK TORONTO

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The speech was a bracing tonic. Hardly any other Minister would have dared to make it lest he should be accused of reckless optimism. Coming as it does, however, from General SMUTS, who has no particular axe to grind, and no interest—save that of the Empire—to push, and who has behind him a firm reputation for caution and sureness, how can anyone read his interpretation of the military situation without kindling to new enthusiasm and confidence? General SMUTS tells his fellow-countrymen—and we are proud to note that he spoke throughout of “us” and “ours”—that “the Central Alliance is everywhere beaten and everywhere retiring except in Russia.” He is convinced that the war is already won, always assuming that the Allies continue steadfast and unshakable, and go on delivering the sledge-hammer blows under which Germany is reeling.—*Daily Telegraph*, October 5, 1917.

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THE people of this country and of the whole of the Empire deserve that they should be taken into the confidence of their political leaders in this country. They have cheerfully shouldered immeasurable burdens. For more than three years they have borne without flinching the greatest strain. Their determination increases with time, and I am sure that when the last blows in this great war come to be struck, the hardest and the heaviest against the enemy will come from the free society of nations which we must call the British Empire. (Hear, hear.) The offspring of liberty, who have grown up in the household of freedom, under free institutions in this country and other associated nations of the Empire, will be the best champions to vindicate liberty over the whole of the world. (Cheers.) In that spirit I shall speak to you to-day, not to buoy you up with false optimism, but to make you realise the facts as I understand them, and from that I hope we shall gather fresh strength and confidence for the task before us. (Cheers.)

Personally I feel sure that the war situation is clearing up, and that the issue is no longer in doubt. In an interview which I gave some time ago to French newspapers I expressed my opinion that the Germans were already beaten, and that their leaders know it. That is my conviction, and if that is so it lays upon us the clear duty of relaxing and sparing no efforts to reach our goal.

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(Cheers.) The terrible odds against which we have been fighting during the greater part of the war are being reversed, and it is not for us to be weary now that the great goal is looming in sight. I cannot discuss with you the whole of the war situation. But there are certain points to which I may usefully refer. I propose to take the Germans on their own ground, the ground on which they are strongest, and on which they challenged the world and calculated success to be certain. That is their purely military fighting power. That, I may point out by the way, was the wrong ground for them to choose. In choosing it they have made probably the greatest mistake of their whole history, for this war has turned out to be contrary to German calculations. This war has turned out to be not merely a military war. It has gone far deeper than a military war. Its final decision will depend much more on political, economical, and psychological, than upon merely military, factors. (Hear, hear.)

ENEMY ON THE DEFENSIVE.

Let us look at the matter from the German angle, and see how the purely military situation stands to-day, at the beginning of the fourth year of war. With one or two exceptions the enemy is everywhere on the defensive, everywhere slowly retiring before us. That the movement is necessarily slow is inherent in the very nature of the new form of warfare, which requires enormous transport of heavy artillery and mechanical appliances of all kinds. Even an advance of a mile by us involves tremendous loss to the enemy, a loss comparable to the losses sustained in the great battles of former wars. Such losses and such defeats are being continually inflicted on the enemy.

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Take the Western front, where the flower of the German army is gathered to-day. One continuous retirement has been proceeding from the summer of last year, very slow, but very sure. Verdun, Champagne, Vimy, Arras, Messines, and so on. On that almost immovable line the manhood of Germany is slowly bleeding to death, and a tragedy of slaughter is being enacted which probably has no parallel in the history of the world. It is no question of great pushes. A war of machinery is largely immobile in nature. The movements are slow, but the results are all the more terrible and crushing.

To defeat Germany we need not advance to the Rhine nor to her frontiers. One strip of country is as good as another if they will only make a stand. I assure you that long before we have reached the German frontier or the line of the Rhine Germany will have sued for peace. Our military predominance on that front is no longer in question, and remember that it was on that very issue of military predominance that Germany challenged the whole world in August, 1914.

Take the Italian front. Can anyone doubt that the successes and victories of the Italian armies in the recent months have gained for our Allies complete predominance over the Austrians on that front? (Cheers.) Or take the Turkish front. The Turks have already lost Armenia, Egypt, Arabia, and Mesopotamia, and now there is much talk of Falkenhayn's great offensive to recapture Baghdad. The newspapers of the Fatherland are stuffed to the full with material which is mostly meant for Turkish consumption. Yet in the midst of all that is happening the ever-victorious Maude has struck a splendid blow—(loud cheers)—and has captured a whole Turkish division on the Euphrates. When the temperature has become

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cooler, and fighting on the great Turkish front becomes possible, you may look forward with interest to developments. I do not say there will not be a keen struggle, and that we should not take all necessary precautions, but I do say that in the end Turkey will find out that she is not going to be saved by her German masters or by Falkenhayn from still further humiliation and defeat. Defeated and retiring everywhere, the enemy has singled out one opponent for his offensive blows. He is doing his best to strike down Russia. Great as have been the blunders of Germany in the past, I am not sure that from the point of view of far-sighted policy this is not her greatest and most fatal blunder of all. The invasion of Belgium and the submarine campaign were colossal mistakes, which have cost Germany this war.

ENEMY'S INTERNAL CONDITION.

Her striking down of Russia at this juncture may do more, and may even compromise her distant future, for she is striking one who cannot defend herself, who, like herself, was an autocracy, and has received a new consciousness from the sufferings of this war, and who is now being led blindfold, incapable of offensive action. Russia is a woman labouring in childbirth, and this is the moment chosen by Germany to strike her down. Whatever may be the strict rights of the case, the spirit of history will never forgive her. The liberty which has been painfully born in Russia will rise and become the most implacable foe of the future Germany. If I were a German I would carefully bear in mind the good old Bismarckian policy, and would avoid making an enemy of the Slav, the future historic enemy of the German. That is the military

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situation. The Central Alliance is everywhere beaten, everywhere retiring, except in Russia.

To their military dangers you have to add demoralised internal conditions, about which there is no manner of doubt, and the spectre of a bankrupt future. Then you can see the end is no longer uncertain. More and more the real inwardness of the war situation is being appreciated in Germany. The German rulers are trying to still the people with the fond hope that the submarine will beat us yet, and that we shall be forced to conclude a German peace. All their hopes now centre in the submarine, the new weapon of war, as the decisive weapon. These hopes are destined to be illusory. Whatever the dangers of the submarine, they have ceased to be the decisive factor. That you can take from me as bed-rock fact. (Cheers.) The published figures show that the submarine is being fought with rapidly-increasing vigour and success, and, what with diminishing losses and with our rapidly-extending shipbuilding programme here and in America, we are confidently looking forward to the time when our mercantile tonnage will be on the increase, instead of decreasing. (Cheers.) It is useless to conceal that there was a time when we felt very anxious, but that time is past. The submarine is beaten by the silent heroism of the Navy and the bravery of our mercantile marine. (Cheers.) Deeds have been done on the seas so astounding that details cannot be published until the end of the war. In the general political temper of our times less than justice has been done to this aspect of our national effort, but I feel sure that the future will appraise it at its true value. (Hear, hear.)

Defeated on the battlefield, baffled in the submarine campaign, the enemy is now more and more striking at us

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through non-combatants, through our women and children. At every opportunity bombs are being dropped on our towns and cities in order to strike terror to the hearts of our population and to weaken and destroy our national spirit. Aerial warfare against the defenceless is now their weapon, and I venture to predict that this will not only fail, but prove a terrible boomerang to the enemy. (Prolonged cheers.)

"EYE FOR AN EYE."

You remember what happened to the Zeppelins. They visited our East Coast towns and scattered bombs all the way. They were really more dangerous than the aeroplanes, and the casualties sustained from them were higher; but the population of this country was determined to see that danger through. Where is the Zeppelin now? (Cheers.) The Zeppelin was followed by aeroplanes in their day attacks on London. We took their measure also, and since last July no daylight raid has taken place on London. They may come again, but I am sure if they do they will get the reception that they deserve. (Cheers.) Now the enemy has taken up night attacks. It is very possible that they will continue, and they may conceivably increase in the future. We are fully alive to the dangers of these new attacks and the difficulty of meeting them adequately. It must be pointed out that, in spite of the most resolute defence on the Western front, the enemy machines continually bomb behind our lines at night. However, we have not been discouraged, but have set about the defence of London on novel lines, and with a great measure of success. London has within the last week or so been visited by at least twenty machines a night, yet only one or two have really succeeded in

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penetrating the defences. (Hear, hear.) Those defences will continue to develop, and the public may rest assured that nothing will be left undone which will tend to the more complete protection of this great nerve-centre of the Empire, as well as other places likely to be visited by enemy machines. (Cheers.)

Naturally, you will not expect me to give particulars, nor to give any definite promise of certainty of success—the whole field of operations is so very novel—but no effort will be spared to protect the people against these outrages. The Government appreciate to the full the calmness and heroism displayed by the vast bulk of the people in the most trying circumstances. It is no use minimising the danger and alarm caused by these raids, but at the same time it is the worst possible policy to exaggerate them. The Germans receive the most exaggerated and distorted accounts of the demoralising effects and the damage caused. I have seen accounts by so-called neutral eye-witnesses who give the most awful and astounding reports of these raids and their effects. The London population is pointed out as in a state of ungovernable panic, and many banks and business places are reported to have been destroyed.

You know that the material result of these raids is absolutely negligible, and as for the loss of life, several more people are killed and injured in 'bus accidents than by the raids. I have been in every raid since last July, and nothing has struck me more than the calmness of the people as a whole. I think there is a little too much light-heartedness in some quarters, and it would be wise for every citizen to follow the sound advice issued by the police with regard to taking cover. (Hear, hear.) Nothing can be wider of the mark than the distortions and exaggerations given to the

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German people to buoy them up with false hopes that these raids are steadily undermining our national morale, and that London is being converted into a heap of ruins.

BOMBS ON GERMANY.

All will be well if all will do their duty. The people have a right to the best protection the Government can give them, while the Government are entitled to expect from you the observance of that steadfastness of spirit which is the one assured foundation of our coming victory. Our air policy has been entirely different from that of the enemy. It has been our main and constant object to obtain and maintain military predominance in the air on the various fronts, and to bomb only military objectives and naval bases of all sorts. Since July 31 there has been a great battle in Flanders, and simultaneously a great struggle in the air. In the Battle of the Somme last year we mastered the enemy completely in the air. He has made great efforts to prevent us doing it again. He has concentrated a great many aeroplanes against us from every front. We started bombing with heavier-than-air machines. The enemy followed us, but has not caught us up. He bombs French towns and troops behind the lines, and does far more damage there, inflicts far heavier losses, than we have suffered in England. But we bomb him more, and with far greater losses, behind his lines. (Hear, hear.) Last month our naval and military aeroplanes dropped 207 tons of bombs behind the enemy lines. In the same period the enemy dropped $4\frac{1}{2}$ tons of bombs on London. In that month we bombed him twenty-three days and nineteen nights, chiefly attacking his aerodromes at St. Denis Westrem and Gontrode, where the Gothas live, setting hangars and sheds on fire, damaging his machines,

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and pitting his aerodromes with shells. We also bombed his railway sidings, causing him very heavy losses. In London during last month the total casualties in air raids were fifty-one killed and 247 injured. During the first nine months of this year the total losses in air raids were 191 killed and 749 wounded, as against 487 persons killed and 14,104 injured in traffic accidents in the metropolitan police area. You will see therefore that for the same period the losses in 'bus accidents have been several times as great as those from air raids. Hitherto we have as far as possible avoided using aeroplanes as engines of destruction and terrorism against the civil population of the enemy countries. The enemy, on the contrary, has from the very beginning devoted his aircraft to all kinds of non-military uses. First with the Zeppelins and now with the aeroplanes he is conducting a campaign of ruthless terrorism against undefended towns and populous centres which have no direct military value at all.

Indeed, one cannot but come to the conclusion that the Germans in their air raids are avoiding objects of direct military value. There is really no indication that they are trying to strike buildings or works of military importance. (Hear, hear.) Invariably they attack the residential quarters in London, and not those outside the arsenals and fortifications, or even its docks and such places of direct military importance, except very occasionally and as if by mistake. I imagine the object of all this calculative brutality has been to strike terror into the hearts of the civilian population and destroy the morale of the people by every means, however abominable, and secondly to force us to take our machines from the front for the defence of London and other areas. In both these objects they have miserably failed. (Hear, hear.) There is not in London

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or in England a single machine taken from the front for home defence, and the national temper, instead of weakening, is, on the contrary, hardening under the strain of these terrors. (Cheers.) If the Germans understood the psychology of this people they would have no doubt about this. (Cheers.) Cowards become more cowardly under the threat of danger, but brave men and women only become more determined, and the people of London are now, after the raids, thinking less of peace than ever before. (Cheers.) But the Germans never understood the psychology of their enemies, and so they will continue to blunder on until the end of the chapter.

BRITAIN'S FUTURE POLICY.

Meanwhile a very bitter temper is growing up in this country, which the Government will have to reckon with seriously in settling their air policy, and I am sure it will not be the people of this country who will be to blame for any intensification of the horrors of war. It is wrong to think that we have hitherto had no means at all of carrying aerial warfare into their country. Ever since the Battle of the Somme we have had a clear military supremacy in the air, and in a small way could have followed it up, but we felt that we should rather prepare for an air offensive on a large scale, and we were also anxious as far as possible to avoid adding further horrors to this war, already the most cruel in history. But we are dealing with an enemy whose "kultur"—(laughter)—has not carried him beyond the rudiments of the Mosaic law, and to whom you can only apply the maxim of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." (Cheers.) On that principle we are now most reluctantly forced to apply to him the bombing policy which he has applied to us. I am afraid the Government has no

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longer any choice in the matter. (Hear, hear.) Allow me, however, to emphasise two points which I hope will be borne in mind when it is ultimately found that my words to-day are not mere idle threats, but are serious and far-reaching in import. First, we did not begin this business of bombing industrial and populous centres. The enemy began the practice, just as he began the use of poison gas and many other contraventions of international law. We have been most reluctantly forced to follow suit after a long delay, which has seriously tried the patience of the British people.

"NOT ONLY OUR DUTY BUT OUR RIGHT."

Secondly, I look upon these developments of the art of war as truly bad, and immoral. While I do not fear them, if, as in the present circumstances, they are forced upon us, yet I should infinitely have preferred that both sides should desist from such cruel practices. We shall do our best to avoid German abominations, and in our air offensive against commercial and industrial places we shall use every endeavour to spare as far as possible the innocent and defenceless, who have always in the past enjoyed the protection of international law. But it is inevitable in any extended air offensive on enemy territory now forced on us that they should to some extent also suffer, and I can only express the deepest regret that these developments should have been forced on us. This war is already cruel and horrible beyond anything known in the history of mankind, and it is slowly breaking the heart of humanity. It is almost unbearable to think that another chapter of horrors must be added to the awful story. But we can only plead that it has not been our doing, and that the blame must rest on an enemy who

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apparently recognises no laws, human or divine—(cheers)—who knows no restraint or pity, who sang *Te Deums* over the sinking of the *Lusitania*, and to whom the maiming and slaughter of innocent women and children appears a legitimate means of warfare. In the face of such abominations it is not for us to fold our hands meekly. We can only fight to the uttermost for the ideals of humanity and civilisation, which we trust and feel certain will triumph in the end. (Hear, hear.)

Without being an optimist, and with a full appreciation of the obscurities and uncertainties and dangers which surround us, I believe that essentially, and in the deepest sense, the war is won—(cheers)—and that there are to-day marshalled against the German autocracy forces, moral, military, and economic, which in the end ought to, and will, prove invincible. (Hear, hear.) But many a battle has gone wrong, many a victory has been forfeited and lost, through indecision and wavering and the loss of nerve at the end. What is required of you is an unalterable determination to hold on and to see the struggle through—(cheers)—not in any selfish, imperialist spirit, but in the conviction that this is Armageddon, in which the power of militarism must be slain for ever. It is not only our duty but our right and our privilege to fight to the uttermost to secure that victory. (Cheers.) What is required of your political leaders is calmness and foresight, wisdom to avoid all false moves in this last decisive phase of the struggle, and moderation which will not prolong this agony one day beyond what is necessary. With the people and the leaders understanding and trusting each other on that high moral basis, I have absolutely no doubt in the result. (Cheers.)

